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Death By Bullet, Fire, or Vapor: Examining the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb to End World War II in the Pacific Theatre

Jonathan Keenan

Buffalo State College, jakeena16@gmail.com

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Yamaoke Michiko was heading to work on 6 August 1945 when “a living hell” erupted in front of her.¹ Heard up to fifteen miles away, the explosion released energy in the form of light, heat, radiation, and pressure.² Many believed using such a weapon was the correct action to take, including President Truman. Others, such as General Dwight D. Eisenhower, disagreed and felt that the Allies’ new doomsday device was an “awful thing.”³ Was it better to have decimated 200,000 people, or would it have been more civilized to continue firebombing Japanese cities or mount a risky invasion using an initial force of seven times that used in Normandy? Each possibility called for the destruction of numerous buildings and hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of deaths throughout the archipelago. Truman had to choose from these horrific options the one which would cause the least structural damage and lowest loss of life as compared to the alternatives, and therefore decided to drop the atomic bombs.

At the urging and with the assistance of his pupils, Leo Szilard and Eugene Wigner, Einstein drafted a letter informing President Franklin D. Roosevelt on 11 October 1939 concerning the possibility that German scientists were researching a device more destructive than any ever before witnessed: the atomic bomb. In response, the Roosevelt administration launched the Manhattan Project on 6 December 1941, ending the last day of 1946. Research facilities across the United States served the purpose of researching and building an atomic bomb. Some scientists turned a blind eye to what was behind the device was capable of, while their co-workers fell on both sides of the spectrum of how to use it.⁴

The Target Committee, consisting of Major General Leslie R. Groves and scientists such as John Von Neumann, declared the targeted cities needed to be “large urban areas of not less than three miles in diameter.”⁵ James Byrnes, head of the Office of War Mobilization (1943-1945), added “that the bomb be used ... against a target centering on a Japanese war plant surrounded by civilian housing.”⁶ In compliance with these two requirements, the main targets were chosen on 27 April, 1945. At the top of the list was Hiroshima because it was “the largest untouched target not on the 21st Bomber Command priority list.”⁷ One of the alternative targets was Nagasaki due to its importance as a military and naval base.

Before the final decision was required, President Roosevelt died in April 1945, leaving the United States in the hands of its Vice President, Harry S. Truman. A few days later, Truman received a letter from Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson concerning a “highly secret matter” to which he added that “you ought to know about it without much further delay.”⁸ The following day Stimson briefed Truman about the Manhattan Project and the atomic bomb’s

¹ Yamaoke Michiko, “Eight Hundred meters from the Hypocenter,” *Voices of a People's History of the United States* (1992): 365.

² United States Survey, “United States Strategic Bombing Survey Summary Report (Pacific War),” *Voices of a People's History of the United States* (1992): 367.

³ Gar Alperovitz. *Atomic diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam; the use of the atomic bomb and the American confrontation with Soviet power*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 14

⁴ Barton J. Bernstein, “Saving American Lives and Pressing the Soviets: the Atomic Bomb Decision,” *The Origins of the Cold War* (1999): 21.

⁵ Bernstein, 99.

⁶ Alperovitz, 44.

⁷ Bernstein, 99.

⁸ Alperovitz, 60.

development. After the discovery, Truman felt these new weapons were “the greatest thing in history” due to their potential to end the war.⁹

When questioned after the war about his decision, Truman stated,

I was greatly disturbed over the unwarranted attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor and their murder of our prisoners of war. The only language they seem to understand is one we have been using to bombard them. When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast.¹⁰

Despite his anti-Japanese prejudice, Truman, like many Americans, felt unconditional surrender was necessary and did not want the Japanese to get off easy for their actions concerning Pearl Harbor, the treatment of prisoners of war, and the horrors in Nanjing. This desire for retribution caused the Americans to deny any other offers of surrender. Only until after the war did questions about the advisability and morality of ‘the bomb’ begin to surface, such as its necessity and ability to end the war.

As much as Truman wanted unconditional surrender, he knew the Japanese would not agree to it because they wanted to keep their emperor and would be steadfast in that decision. The Japanese attempted several times to negotiate their surrender to the Allies. Allen Dulles, the man overseeing the Office of Strategic Services operations in Switzerland, was approached by representatives of the Japanese government. These Japanese officials requested to keep their emperor and constitution if they were to surrender.¹¹ The Japanese also appealed to the Soviets after the Russo-Japanese Neutrality Pact expired in May 1945. Soviet troops had redeployed to the east in anticipation of declaring war on the Japanese and invading Japanese-controlled Manchuria. Regardless, Hirohito sent a personal message to Moscow asking for a negotiating channel in the attempt to change the surrender terms.¹² By July 13, the United States Secretary of the Navy knew from intercepted cables that the Japanese were making attempts to end the war through the Soviets.¹³ The only thing preventing the Japanese surrender was the American desire for unconditional surrender, which Stalin reluctantly complied.

Truman knew the Japanese were at the end of their rope, and if the Russian threat did not convince them to surrender, the atomic bombs would. Attempting to prevent this catastrophic event, the Allies issued the Potsdam Declaration to the Japanese Supreme Council. In response Premier Suzuki was quoted in a newspaper to have “considered the declaration of no great value and that he intended to ignore it.”¹⁴ Suzuki felt, with false optimism, the war could still be ended with terms beneficial to the Japanese rather than having to bow down to a Western ruler.

⁹ Thomas J. McCormick, *America's Half Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 44.

¹⁰ Bernstein, 108-109.

¹¹ Alperovitz, 12.

¹² Hugh Borton, *Japan's Modern History*. (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1955) 385.

¹³ Alperovitz, 12.

¹⁴ Borton, 390.

Two days after the United States dropped the first bomb on Hiroshima, Russia declared war on Japan. During this set of events, the Imperial government debated how to proceed with the war despite a second bomb exploding over Nagasaki, August 8 1945. By this point, the Japanese people had little idea of Japan's predicament, as the government told the people they were doing well in the war.¹⁵ Proving this, a Japanese soldier, Koshu Itabashi, commented after the war that "we were like Sergeant Yoko and Lieutenant Onoda – the men who emerged from the jungles ... in the 1970s – who couldn't imagine that Japan had been defeated."¹⁶

An alternative to dropping the bomb was to invade the Japanese archipelago. The Japanese Supreme Council convened exactly one year after the Normandy Invasion to combat this possibility and discuss its options. At the same time, the military standpoint of Japan changed to attrition tactics.¹⁷ To defend the archipelago, the Kaiso Cabinet (July 1944- August 1945) emphasized "fighting the enemy 'in the interior [of the island]' " in order to draw them away from constant Allied naval and air support.¹⁸ Dubbed Operation Decision, the island's defensive plan called for converting 10,000 trainer planes into suicide planes. Stationed on the beaches would be 2,350,000 trained troops, supported by 4 million army and navy civilian employees. Finally, 28 million civilians were to be charged with defending the island.¹⁹ The Japanese government was prepared to turn the island into another Iwo Jima, sacrificing as many people as needed. To exemplify this, Anomi believed "the use of suicide squads, *a levée en masse*, and the invincible spirit of Japan would result in a victorious, decisive stand for the homeland."²⁰ Several options the Supreme Council considered included: massive *kamikaze* plane attacks, '*Bonzai*' charges on the ground as well as human torpedoes and rocket bombs.²¹

Around the middle of June 1945, the need to invade the main island of Japan was still a possibility for the Allies.²² They scheduled the assault on Japan for 1 November 1945 calling for an initial 767,000 troops.²³ Later on, a total of 1.5 million Allied troops, seven times the number used to take the Normandy beaches, were committed to the landing, with an additional 3 million in reserve.²⁴ If the Allies invaded Japan, a massacre would have ensued. Though the Japanese citizens lacked the weaponry and capability of those who defended Iwo Jima against United States Marines, fighting for their homeland could cause them to fight just as fiercely. Based on the Allied commander's opinions, it is estimated that 1,000,000 American and 500,000 British casualties would result in the invasion of Japan with an additional 10,000,000 to 20,000,000 Japanese casualties in the defense of their homeland.²⁵ "William Manchester wrote, 'you think of the lives which would have been lost in an invasion of Japan's home islands ... and

¹⁵ Yamaoka, 364.

¹⁶ James Bradley, *Flyboys*, (Little, Brown and Company, 2003) 300.

¹⁷ Borton, 387.

¹⁸ Herbert Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 2000)480.

¹⁹ Paul Johnson, *Modern Times the World from the Twenties to the Nineties* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 425.

²⁰ Borton, 387.

²¹ Bix, 494-495.

²² Alperovitz, 12.

²³ Bernstein, 106.

²⁴ James Bradley, *Flags of our Fathers*, (New York: Bantam, 2000), 453

²⁵ Johnson, 425

you thank God for the atomic bomb.’ ”²⁶ Many who knew of this invasion plan agreed with the use of the atomic bombs due to the vast number of expected casualties on both sides.

Some believed the end of the war was imminent without dropping the atomic bombs on Japan. By April 1945, General Curtis LeMay believed the war would end by September, if not October, through air raids alone.²⁷ The bombs “had nothing to do with the end of the war,” but Allied air supremacy could bring about unconditional surrender, nullifying the need for an invasion.²⁸ The night of 9 March 1945, the first incendiary raid carried out by 334 B-29s is LeMay’s case in point. In this single run, 40% of Tokyo was burnt to the ground killing 83,000 and injuring an additional 102,000 occupants.²⁹ The flames were so hot that “water boiled in canals, glass melted, and heat from updrafts destroyed some bombers.”³⁰ By the end of the war the United States had perfected these attacks as proven in the 1 August air raid. During this raid, napalm burned 80% of Hachioji, 65% of Nagaoka and 99.5% of Toyama.³¹ American air supremacy over Japan toward the later part of the war allowed Allied planes to firebomb Japanese cities with a success rate of 65-99%, killing numerous civilians and destroying significant sections of the cities. Based on this information, how many more Japanese would have been killed if the firebombing of Japanese cities continued? From these conventional raids, one out of every four homes were destroyed and as many as four million citizens were displaced in Tokyo alone.³²

This tactic would have caused the war to last longer and the delay caused by negotiations would have caused the casualties to double, according to estimates. The atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima was equivalent to 220 fully loaded B-29s, showing that “a single atomic explosion represented no order-of-magnitude increase in destructiveness over a conventional air raid.”³³ The atomic bomb ended conventional bombing of Japanese cities several months earlier than projected.³⁴ Based on supply usage and allied bombings, the Japanese leaders believed the war would have been over by the end of 1945 if not before November 1. By this time, thousands more Japanese would have died due to the Russian invasion and continual air raid bombings.³⁵

As agreed at Potsdam, the Soviet Union entered the Pacific Theatre in August, three months after the surrender of Germany, with the invasion of Japanese-held Manchuria.³⁶ American leaders, however, seemed to have preferred using the atomic bombs to the Soviets entering the war. America wanted the war to end as soon as possible to prevent the Soviets from gaining much of the Manchuria region thus negating a Soviet occupation zone in East Asia, similar to the one in Germany.³⁷ Truman believed that “our dropping of the atomic bomb on

²⁶ Bradley, *Flyboys*, 297.

²⁷ Alperovitz, 17.

²⁸ United States Survey, 372.

²⁹ Johnson, 424

³⁰ Bix, 490-491.

³¹ Bradley, *Flyboys*, 293. 1,466 tons of napalm were used on Toyama alone

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Bernstein, “Saving American Lives...”, 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 298.

³⁵ United States Survey, 372.

³⁶ Alperovitz, 26.

³⁷ McCormick, 45.

Japan... forced Russia to reconsider her position in the Far East.”³⁸ Secretary Stimson stated that those such as Byrnes were anxious to get the Japanese affair over with before the Russians got involved.³⁹ Ending the war a few days after the Soviet invasion prevented a Pro-Soviet Iron Curtain to form in the Pacific, despite several countries becoming communist within thirty years following the war. This new weapon gave the United States a significant bargaining chip for negotiating with other countries. American leaders felt the bomb’s destructiveness would intimidate the Soviets, making them more manageable in Europe. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Byrnes launched a “diplomatic offensive” against the Soviet control in Eastern Europe in an attempt to make them soften their position.⁴⁰

When Einstein heard of the Manhattan Project’s progress, he began to regret informing the Roosevelt administration of the bomb. Central to his misgivings was the danger of what the technology could unleash. To express his concerns, Einstein wrote fellow scientist Niels Bohr in 1944 stating “politicians do not appreciate the possibilities and consequently do not know the extent of the menace.”⁴¹ Adding this new device was to be more powerful than any seen before it, Einstein did not feel the politicians comprehended its potential. Others, like Oppenheimer, advocated for using the bomb, believing its “combat use was attractive, partly because it would ‘impress’ the Soviets and help keep the peace.”⁴² There were those who felt that the atomic bombs should not have been used at all. Of the same mind as Eisenhower, Chief of Staff Admiral William Leahy wrote on 18 June 1945 that “[i]t is my opinion at the present time that a surrender of Japan can be arranged with terms that can be accepted by Japan” and therefore felt the atomic bombs were unnecessary.⁴³

Some blame Truman for dropping the atomic bombs on Japan due to previously unknown information which came to light after the war, unavailable to Truman in 1945. In his situation, without much of this recently gathered information, how can one be sure that he too would not have used the bombs as he had? Truman used the bombs to prevent the invasion of the Japanese archipelago, a Pro-Soviet Iron Curtain in Asia, the firebombing of Japanese cities, and hundreds of thousands to 20 million more from being killed on both sides during lengthy negotiations. It was more logical and humane to Truman to save 11,000,000 to 21,000,000 than killing 200,000 people.

Major General Groves, the military supervisor who oversaw the Manhattan Project, conservatively estimated “the energy generated to be in excess of the equivalent of 15,000 to 20,000 tons of TNT.”⁴⁴ Allied commanders ultimately chose Hiroshima as the first target for the 6 August attack. The quantity of people killed from the explosion and the ensuing fire is estimated to range from 80,000 to 150,000.⁴⁵ Three days later, a second bomb was dropped on

³⁸ Ibid, 239.

³⁹ Ibid, 22, 25.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 53.

⁴¹ Walter Isaacson, “Einstein and the Bomb”, *World War II* (McLean, Virginia, June 2007) 62.

⁴² Bernstein, 15

⁴³ Alperovitz, 17.

⁴⁴ McCormick, 43.

This is equivalent to 2,273 B-17s or 1,000 B-29s. The United States Air Force had 11,931 B-17s in total and 1,100 B-29s when the squadrons were at full capacity in the Pacific Theatre’s Mariana Islands base.

⁴⁵ James Bradely, *Flyboys*, 297.

Nagasaki due to weather conditions, killing an additional 78,000.⁴⁶ It is vastly debated on how many died due to aftereffects of the atomic bomb, however as many as 200,000 additional deaths were related to the happenings in August 1945.

The weapon may be one of 'revulsion', as General Hastings Ismay of the British military said, but it ended the war quickly. Even though 200,000 were initially killed, the atomic bomb saved innumerable others from destruction caused by incendiary bombs or invasion.⁴⁷ The two other Allied leaders, Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin, agreed the bomb should have been used against a Japanese city, and it is certain that if the Germans or Japanese had completed the weapon in time they too would have used it to their advantage.⁴⁸ It was the Americans, however, who had the capability and funds to create such a weapon and drop two successful bombs.

Truman chose to use a weapon out of Pandora's Box; destroying 50% of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined structurally and killed 200,000 people in the two cities. In retrospect, American firebombing campaigns destroyed 60-99% of the cities and all other options eclipsed the death toll with ease. After the Second World War ended, American soldier Paul Fussell stated that "[t]he degree to which Americans register shock and extraordinary shame about the Hiroshima bomb correlates closely with lack of information [they have] about the Pacific war."⁴⁹ The atrocities committed by the Japanese were plentiful as they advanced in their military campaign. For example, the number killed by the atomic bomb is shadowed by those beheaded or slain from samurai swords.⁵⁰ Other acts include the Bataan Death March, the Rape of Nanjing, and cannibalism. To say that the use of the atomic bomb was murder is incomplete with examining the actions of the Japanese. Americans know of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks, but the Imperial Army's own atrocities have not been publicized as widely.

Many consider the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki a disgrace to America. One response to this is Air Force General LeMay's proposition of whether it was "much more wicked to kill people with a nuclear bomb, than killing people by busting their heads in with rocks?"⁵¹ In both scenarios, the person is dead. The only difference being how one perceives as being the more humane option. The Japanese feeling of loyalty to the Emperor and the nation was so strong the people were willing to sacrifice their own lives in order for the rest to prosper. From what has been gathered and discovered, using the atomic bomb was the right choice. On one hand, it killed as many as 430,000 but on the other, saved millions more, allowing them to live the rest of their lives in a world fearful of the possible need to perpetrate such an atrocity again. For Yamoke Michiko and the other atomic bomb victims, the experience was "a living hell." However, if the horrific weapons were not used, many more would have unnecessarily experienced this "living hell" if the Allies utilized a different option.

⁴⁶ Johnson, 426.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 17.

⁴⁸ Bernstein, "Saving American Lives ...", 108-109.

⁴⁹ Bradley, *Flyboys*, 297.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Bradley, *Flyboys*, 297.

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